

PERSHING PARK
(Reservation No. 617)
(City Square No. 226)
Bounded by 14th, 15th, and E streets
and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-895

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

PERSHING PARK
(Reservation Number 617)
(City Square No. 226)

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HABS No. DC-695

Location: Bounded by 14th, 15th, and E streets and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW.

Owner/Manager: U.S. government, National Park Service.

Present Use: Concert site, park, eating area, skating rink.

Significance: This quadrilateral was included on the L'Enfant and Ellicott plans as a city block. As City Square No. 226 it was divided into lots that were sold for private development. Throughout the early twentieth century, the government purchased all the lots on the block, and in 1938 the space was transferred to the National Park Service. As part of the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation plan, it was redesigned in the 1980s and now serves as an eating and recreation area as well as a monument to World War I Gen. John Pershing.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: This quadrilateral was set aside as a block for private development on L'Enfant's plan of 1791 and Ellicott's plan of 1792.
2. Original and subsequent owners: Before this square was laid out at the city's founding, it was within a tract of land owned by David Burnes.¹ Although the lots in this city square were sold for private development, by the early part of the twentieth century the federal government owned or occupied the majority of the buildings in the block. The entire square was transferred from the Treasury Department and the Commissioners of the District of Columbia to the National Park Service on December 16, 1938 (Land Transfer Order No. 539).
3. Original and subsequent alterations:

1800s:	Lots in City Square No. 226 filled with a variety of private structures.
ca. 1930:	Entire block cleared of structures to be developed as a park.
1942:	Temporary "Information Building" constructed in the block. ²

¹ McNeil, 42.

² Stanley, 53-54.

- 1956: Information Building demolished.³
- ca. 1965: Naturalistic landscape installed in the square.
- 1980: Park redesigned.

B. Historical Context:

On Pierre L'Enfant's plan for the city, this quadrilateral space adjacent to the land set aside for the President's Grounds was not intended as a park, but was to be divided into lots and sold for private development.⁴ Andrew Ellicott's 1792 map designated it as City Square No. 226. Before the land was acquired by the government for the federal city in 1791, the several acres that comprise this parcel were among many owned by David Burnes, whose sole heir made a fortune since the holdings were located in what would become the most populated region of the early city.⁵

Because this block was located on the south side of Washington's busiest thoroughfare and near the President's House, the lots on its northeast side soon featured Federal-style rowhouses, similar to those that lined much of the route between the President's House and Capitol. Although it was one of the only roadways consistently maintained throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, Pennsylvania Avenue, with its large ruts, puddles, dust, and mud, was still notoriously difficult to travel. Nevertheless, it was the most direct route between the city's most important buildings and was soon lined with a variety of dwellings, boarding houses, hotels, saloons, and merchants.

An alley ran from east to west through the middle of the block, and by mid century every lot north of the alley was developed with a consistent row of buildings facing Pennsylvania Avenue. The few vacant lots facing onto E Street to the south and 15th Street to the west were developed soon after the Civil War. In 1884 the Washington Light Infantry purchased the large vacant lot on the southwest corner of the square, at the corner of 15th and E streets, and erected an immense Romanesque structure to house an armory and drill space. The building was best known, however for a large second-floor space occupied by the Albaugh Opera House, one of the city's larger theaters.⁶

Although this block was mostly filled with well-kept, reputable establishments, it formed the northwest corner of the triangular region between Pennsylvania Avenue, President's Park, and the Mall that was known throughout the late nineteenth century as "Murder Bay." This sprawling neighborhood along the north side of the noxious canal attracted disreputable businesses and became known as a haven for criminals. When the McMillan Senate Commission completed its report on the improvement of the city in

³ Colyer, 175.

⁴ For more information on this square see "Square 226 and Reservations 32 & 33," HABS No. DC-474.

⁵ McNeil, 42; Because Burnes owned property in what later became the most populated region of the city, his sole heir, Marcia Burnes became the richest woman in the early city.

⁶ Goode, 357-59.

1902, it proposed replacing the jumble of buildings in this 24-block triangle with a grand complex of federal offices. The commission comprised of world-renowned designers introduced a vision of Washington as the White City on the Potomac and advocated the use of classical design motifs. In keeping with this scheme, by 1910 Congress had approved a plan to locate the departments of State and Justice, Commerce, and Labor between 14th and 15th streets, south of Pennsylvania Avenue. The Department of the Treasury acquired the title to all of the lots within this region soon after, but the buildings in City Square No. 226 remained standing until 1930.

A 1916 plan for the federal building complex proposed that the Department of Justice would extend north into City Square No. 226, thereby closing E Street. As it was finally designed in the 1920s, however, E Street remained open and City Square No. 226--too small for a building--was to be landscaped to contribute to the Federal Triangle setting. The open space was favored since it would not obstruct the view of the Department of Commerce building planned to the south. The new park was to feature a \$1 million fountain donated by the state of Pennsylvania. The buildings in the square were demolished--including the ca. 1889 Randall House hotel, which had replaced a row of Federal-style houses on the northwest corner of the block, the Grand Army of the Republic Hall, and Albaugh's Opera House, then operated as Poli's Theater. The fountain was apparently never erected, however, and the huge unlandscaped expanse was used as a parking lot.

In 1938 the National Park Service acquired jurisdiction of City Square No. 226; the building lots were transferred from the Department of the Treasury and the alley from the District of Columbia. Four years later, when the United States entered World War II, the "Information Building" was hastily erected in the vacant city block.⁷ This temporary building was not demolished until 1956.⁸

By the 1960s, the stretch of roadway between the Capitol and White House was widely considered a disgrace to the nation, lined by deteriorating structures on the north side and large, unremarkable buildings on the south. Noticing its condition during his inaugural parade in 1961, President John F. Kennedy made a comment that initiated a three-decade program to improve and redevelop the avenue. A special committee, formed at the president's request, studied the avenue and created several reports throughout the 1960s. After Kennedy's assassination, the park was finally landscaped during President Lyndon Johnson's administration under First Lady Ladybird Johnson's city beautification program. The naturalistic scheme with meandering paths and amorphously shaped flowerbeds was installed in the mid 1960s.

Despite measures such as park plantings, however, the west terminus of the avenue east of the Treasury Building was criticized for its lack of focus and grandeur. Redevelopment plans of the late 1960s featured a large plaza with patterned paving and fountains that would serve as an orientation area for visitors to the nation's capital. Called National Square, this plaza was to encompass the land in the former City Square No. 226, as well as City Square No. 225 to the north, then occupied by the Willard and Washington hotels. In its review of this design, the Commission of Fine Arts objected

⁷ Stanley, 53-54.

⁸ Colyer, 175.

to the demolition of the historically significant hotels and asserted that the large, unrelieved expanse of concrete would be unbearable during Washington's hot summers.

Partly as a result of these objections, Congress enacted a law in 1972 creating the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (PADC)—which continued in the spirit of the ad hoc committee formed by President Kennedy—but reached a new solution for this end of the avenue. The PADC plan submitted in 1974 included two smaller parks at the north terminus of the avenue, a rectangular park between 13th and 14th streets, and a park honoring Gen. John Pershing in City Square No. 226.

M. Paul Friedburg and Jerome Lindsay presented a design for Pershing Park in 1979. Asked to incorporate the Pershing monument, an eating area, and a skating rink and all of its accoutrements—pipes, drainage, maintenance facilities, restrooms, and a changing area—Friedburg said it was "a very small park to be so heavily burdened by so much construction." Friedburg's solution accentuated the existing contours of the terrain, elevating the west and south sides above a sunken region on the north side for the skating rink and eating area. The Pershing Memorial, designed by sculptor Robert White, is situated above the street level at the east end of the park, atop underground maintenance facilities. The mixed elevations and tall granite walls incorporated in the memorial buffer the park from the noise of E and 14th streets. The only portion of the park on street level faces north onto Pennsylvania Avenue—the quietest of the surrounding roadways. Friedburg planned that this orientation to the north would be further enhanced by the renovation of the Beaux Arts-style Willard Hotel. Closed since the 1960s, the hotel was fully restored in the 1980s.

Park plantings were selected to enhance the unique plan. Honey locusts were generously planted on the elevated regions, and paper birches were planted in cutouts in the paved plaza around the pool and food-service kiosk. Ivy was planted in the stepped granite terraces leading down to the skating rink to soften the expanse of stonework in the central area.

Additional plantings were set in place in 1981 under the guidance of Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden, who had popularized the use of wild grasses in several other parks in the city, to soften and embellish Friedburg's concept. River birches replaced the paper birches, which had succumbed to disease. Water lilies, lotuses, and water canna planted in the pool attract serendipitous visits from local waterfowl. The park design has been widely praised and noted for its subtle changes throughout the year.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. Overall dimensions: This quadrilateral is approximately 76,860 square feet, or 1.75 acres.
- B. Materials:
 - 1. Pathways, terraces, curbs: Most of this park is paved. The paths and terraces along the elevated south and west sides are paved with square terra cotta pavers. The sunken region surrounding the pool is paved with Belgian blocks in a fish-scale pattern. A concrete-paver terrace surrounds the Pershing Memorial.
 - 2. Vegetation:

- a. Grass, groundcover: The only expanses of sod in the park are in the honey-locust groves along the south, east, and west borders. Ornamental grasses, perennials, and ground covers are planted in cutouts throughout the rest of the park to soften the effect of so much paving.
 - b. Trees, shrubs, hedges: Honey locusts are planted in uniform rows in the sodded areas bordering the elevated east, west and south sides of the park. In the sunken northeast side, birches are planted in grated cutouts. The terraces leading down the central pool feature a variety of shrubs and small ornamental trees.
3. Structures:
- a. Retaining walls: The terracing leading down to the central pool forms a type of retaining wall. Walls are also an integral feature in the Pershing Memorial. The memorial space is comprised of a rectangular plaza shielded from the streets to the south and east by massive stone walls. These walls are inscribed with maps and quotes elucidating the life and work of Gen. Pershing.
 - b. Benches: The park makes use of a variety of seating types. Wood picnic benches are fixed in the northeast region, while movable painted metal chairs and tables are scattered about the sunken area near the pool. Additional seating in this area is provided by fiberglass benches around the trunks of a few of the trees. The elevated walkway along the south and west sides passes paved semicircular areas with fixed metal seats around their perimeters facing into the park. A plain, backless, marble bench sits on the west side of the Pershing Memorial to visually close the west side of the rectangular memorial space. The stone terracing leading down to the central pool is also used as seating by the numerous visitors to the park.
 - c. Statues, markers, monuments:
 - i. The major memorial of the park honors Gen. John A. Pershing. Located near the southeast corner of the space, this rectangular plaza is framed on the east and south sides by tall walls inscribed with maps and quotes. The west side is delineated by a simple marble bench and the north side is open. At the center of the space is a standing portrait statue of Pershing, facing west into the park toward the White House.
 - ii. A bronze sculpture of a bald eagle perched on a globe stands on a tall pedestal near the northwest corner of the park. It was erected in the park in 1982 by the National Wildlife Foundation and the American Communications Network in honor of the centennial of the eagle as the national bird.

- d. Fountains, pools: A large rectangular pool provides a major focus in this park. The north and east sides of the pool are flanked by a paved terrace for dining, while stepped terraces lead down to the pool from the elevated south and west sides of the park. A raised platform on the west side of the pool is about eye-level with pedestrians on the elevated west walkway. Water cascades over the sides of this rectangular platform about 20' to the pool below. In the winter, the pool is used as a skating rink and the Zamboni ice-clearing machine is parked under this platform.
 - e. Lighting: This reservation makes use of several different types of modern lamp types. Approximately 8'-tall simple round fixtures are interspersed throughout the honey locust groves, while the upper path along the west and south sides is illuminated by lampposts with vertical rows of large bare globe bulbs.
5. Buildings: A clear, domed concession stand is located near the northeast side of the pool/skating rink.

C. Site:

1. Character of surrounding structures: Pershing Park is flanked on the east and west sides by parks. Sherman Square, part of Presidents Park fills the region to the west, while Western Plaza, a large paved expanse, fills the block to the east. The Department of Commerce building fills the block to the south, while the Willard and Washington hotels overlook the park from the north.
2. Traffic patterns: Wide and heavily trafficked 14th and 15th streets run along the east and west sides of the park. Pennsylvania Avenue, running along the north side, is probably the least congested of the four roadways at this point since most of its traffic is diverted onto E Street, which runs along the south.
3. Vistas: Although the park design does not emphasize the vista, the east side of Pershing Park faces down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol. The White House Grounds, U.S. Treasury building, and Sherman Square are visible from points on the west side of the park.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

Army Corps of Engineers. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, '87 and '94.

Board of Public Works. "Exhibit Chart of Improved Streets and Avenues." 1872.

Boschke, A. "Topographical Map of the District of Columbia surveyed in the years '57, '58, and '59."

Ellicott, Andrew. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1792.

Hopkins, G. "Map of the District of Columbia from Official Records and Actual Surveys." 1887.

L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

- B. Park plans: Various plans of the park can be located from the Office of Land Use, National Capital Region, National Park Service.

1925: Inventory of Reservation No. 33. (Page 8)

1938: Land transfer plan.

1965: Base plan with spring planting proposals

ca. 1981: Plan of scheduled changes (HABS No. DC-474)

- C. Early Views:

2/16/27: Inventory photograph, "Penna. Ave. - 13th & E Sts., NW." (Page 9)

ca. 1967: Aerial view of park before PADC changes, looking north (Pennsylvania Avenue, 1967, 57).

- D. Bibliography:

Annual Reports of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. Annual Reports of the Chief of Engineers. 1867-1933.

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Goode, James. Capital Losses. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979.

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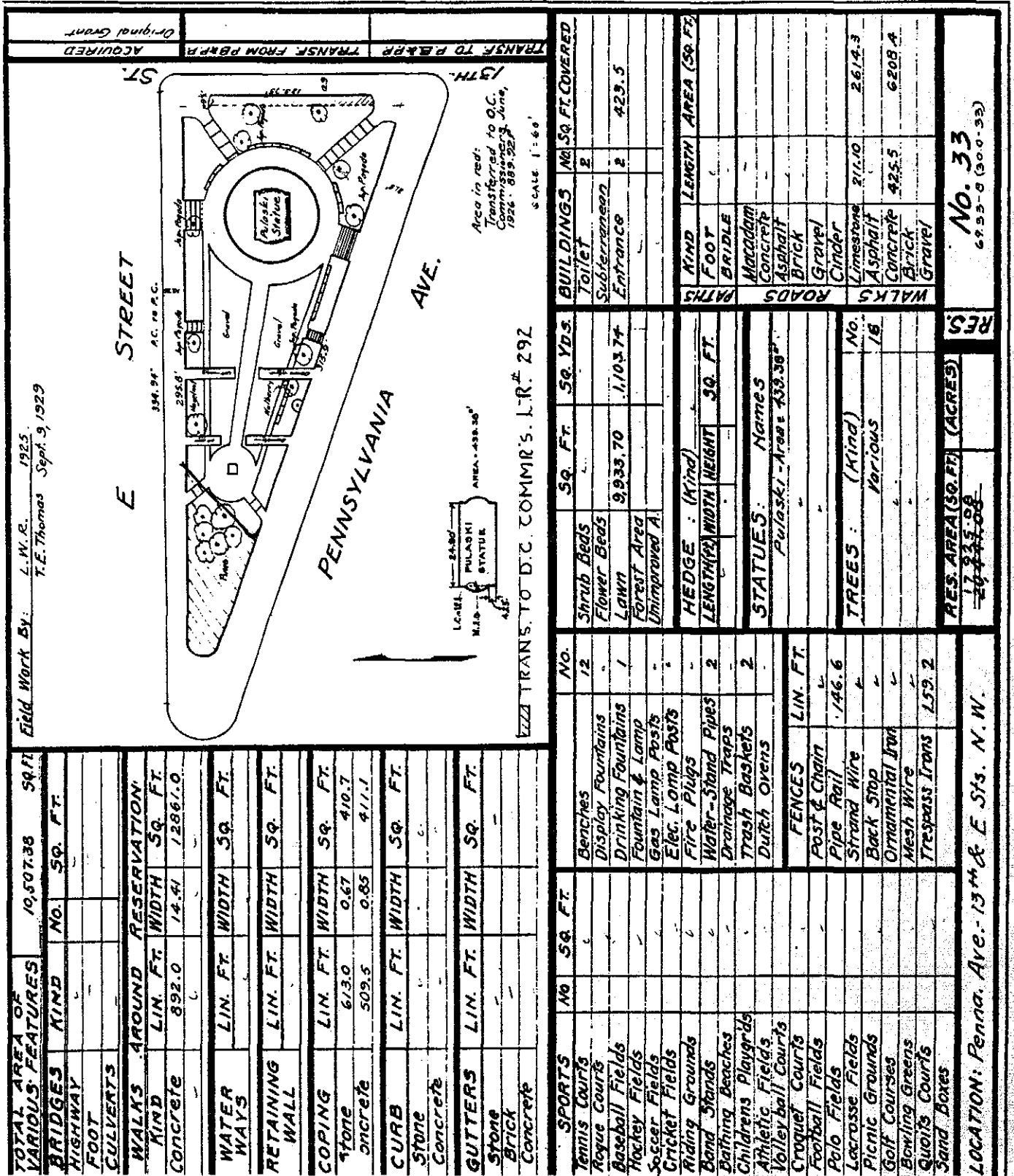
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Sherp, Leonard. "Pershing Park." Landscape Architecture (March 1993): 52-54.





~ PENNA.AVE. - 13TH & E. STS. NW ~
(2/16/27)